

STATEMENT OF  
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REGIONAL FORESTER, NORTHERN REGION  
US FOREST SERVICE  
BEFORE THE  
MONTANA STATE LEGISLATURE  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT  
CONCERNING  
SENATE BILL 34  
CONSIDERING WILDLAND FUELS AS A COMMUNITY NUISANCE  
FEBRUARY 3, 2009  
HELENA, MONTANA

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Tom Tidwell, and I am the Regional Forester for the Northern Region of the U.S. Forest Service. I am pleased to be here today to address this committee on an issue that is critical to all Montanans. The health of Montana's National Forests is important to everyone who lives and recreates here. Concerns about forest health are amplified when forest conditions increase the likelihood of wildfires that have impacts on local economies and private citizens. It is not my intent today to speak in favor of, or in opposition to Senate Bill 34. Instead, I want to tell you that we unequivocally share your view that aggressive treatment on parts of our forests to reduce fuel loads is needed, and report to you our efforts to accomplish this.

I understand that Senate Bill 34 was likely generated by frustration or impatience with the pace of hazardous fuel reduction projects on federal lands. I am pleased the State of

Montana shares our concern on the urgency to address these forest health conditions.

The Forest Service is working closely with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and other federal agencies to address hazardous fuel abatement in the highest priority areas, which include the wildland-urban interface.

Working together, we have already accomplished a considerable amount of fuel reduction work; however, I know we need to do more. Additionally, the Forest Service continues to work closely with landowners across this state, and we have implemented scores of projects with the specific objective of reducing fire hazard to private property. We have actively participated in the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans in the Montana counties where National Forests exist. We also provide funding to help implement firewise programs on and near private residences. It is clear that no one entity working independently can solve this problem.

I recognize that considerable work remains, and we are continually exploring how to expedite needed treatments within the legal and regulatory authorities. Several factors, such as competing priorities for funding, workforce capacity and the need to address public concerns, limit our ability to expand programs and accelerate treatment timeframes. We are working on these factors and, I believe, making progress. I appreciate the intent of Senate Bill 34, which seeks to speed up and streamline this process; however, this bill may not help accomplish that objective. We are not aware of any legal authority supporting state legislation that would allow a county to carry out management activities on National Forests without the prior authorization of the Forest Service. I am concerned that attempts to implement this legislation, if signed into law,

could result in protracted legal actions that could create counter-productive relationships between counties and the Forest Service.

There are a number of success stories where local communities are working together to design fuel reduction projects that have broad community support. These efforts to reach agreement on project design reduce the amount and time needed to complete the environmental analysis. These are the efforts that we want to encourage and support. In addition to the hazardous fuel reduction work accomplished on federal lands, the Forest Service funds important fuel reduction work on state and private lands. The Forest Service, in cooperation with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and local governments, is implementing a comprehensive restoration and protection strategy that focuses our fuel reduction work in the areas of greatest need. Since 2002, the Northern Region has treated approximately 580,000 acres of hazardous fuels on the National Forests of Montana. Approximately 293,000 acres of this treatment are in the wildland-urban interface. Additionally, in the past three years (2006-2008), the Forest Service State and Private Forestry Program has provided more than 8.3 million dollars of funding that has been administered by the State Forester for hazardous fuels treatments on non-federal lands in the wildland-urban interface. In fiscal year 2008, the Forest Service State and Private Forestry Program has provided more than 2.5 million dollars in fire protection funds to the State of Montana. Also, for 2009, the State of Montana will receive an additional \$2 million in State and Private supplemental funding that is earmarked for fuel reduction projects. We value our partnership with Montana DNRC to deliver this program.

The impacts of insect and disease outbreaks in western Montana continue to be a concern to all wildland fire jurisdictions. The Forest Service has completed assessments of Mountain Pine Beetle mortality on the Helena and Beaverhead National Forests and we are planning numerous projects to address this situation. We fully intend to continue with these efforts in the future.

Again, I understand the concern that generated this bill, but the outcome of this legislation could possibly create counter-productive legal issues between counties and federal land managers. I believe passage of this bill would work at cross purposes to what the legislation is trying to achieve. My goal is to continue to work closely with both state and county governments to find ways to be more efficient and effective in getting fuel reduction projects completed. Research has shown that we can moderate fire behavior and increase the success of suppression actions to provide protection in the wildland-urban interface and critical community watersheds, but it would be remiss to believe that our actions will remove all threats of large fires. Fire has always been a part of the Montana landscape, and with ongoing warming climate trends, we will continue to experience large wildland fires. It is important for government to continue to work together, both with the National Forests and with private land owners, to treat fuels and take preventive actions that will mitigate wildfire risks to individuals and property. I welcome additional input regarding this important work and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.